

Thursday, October 1st, 2009 at 3:20 pm

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Air Force Col. Gina Grosso called it "a magnificent Garden State day."

During a bright and sunny autumn morning, the commander of the nation's only tri-service military joint base welcomed the challenge of her role.

"I'm really benefiting from the hard work of thousands of people over the years," said Grosso, who is commander of the 87th Air Base Wing at the base. "My job now is to execute and it's a tremendous opportunity."

McGuire Air Force Base, Fort Dix and Lakehurst Naval Engineering Station officially merged into Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst on Thursday to improve efficiency and save on costs of services.

The bases were forced to merge as part of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure legislation, in which the Department of Defense was directed to realign 26 installations into 12 joint bases across the country. A ceremony was held Thursday on the flight line of the property formerly known as McGuire Air Force Base to celebrate the historic merger.

"These are exciting times," Grosso said. "We have the rare opportunity to stand up a new mission with no playbook and we have complete confidence in that mission. In the future we will be the base that others strive to emulate."

Grosso welcomed Army and Navy personnel to the 87th Air Base Wing and thanked U.S. Rep. John Adler, D-3rd of Cherry Hill, and his predecessor, Jim Saxton, for their work during the transition.

"I want to offer my thanks to Congressman Saxton because without his help these bases would have been closed long ago," Grosso said.

She went on to compliment Adler on his recent efforts of influencing the federal Office of Personnel Management to increase salaries for civilian employees at McGuire and Fort Dix to equal their counterparts at Lakehurst.

"Congressman Adler accomplished in three months what couldn't be fixed in 25 years," Grosso said.

Adler praised military and community leaders for their work during the transition and their willingness to work together and solve the pay disparity issue. He said he looked forward to a long relationship with the base.

"Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst is a vital part of our community and our nation's homeland security," Adler said. "It's essential that we support the joint base and our service members through this transition. I want to thank the men and women who work on this base for their service and sacrifice in keeping our great country safe and free."

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